



Gender-based violence and harassment in workplace health and safety plans

Filed in Labor Rights, Employment and Training, Women, Safety and Health, Worker Safety and Health • By: Robin Runge • December 5, 2024



Submit Feedback

Gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH), including sexual harassment, is an anti-discrimination and an occupational safety and health issue. GBVH can have both short-term and long-term affects on workers' physical and psychological safety. Employers can effectively prevent and address GBVH in the world of work by integrating it into their occupational safety and health plans. Here are three things employers can do to develop an occupational safety plan to prevent GBVH:

1. Identify hazards and risks of GBVH in the world of work

An important first step for employers in the risk management process is identifying GBVH, including sexual harassment, as a reasonably foreseeable hazard in the workplace that could cause risks to health and safety. Subsequently, employers can identify the GBVH hazards and risks present in their workplace. Key steps include:

- Hosting focus groups with key stakeholders in the workplace to find out where there might be risks or risk factors for GBVH. These focus groups should include:
 - Health and safety representatives/committees.
 - Union representatives, if there is a union in the workplace.
 - Workers who are willing to voluntarily participate.
- Circulate anonymous worker surveys asking about their concerns about GBVH as a health and safety issue.
- Conduct a mapping exercise to identify where and when GBVH may occur (e.g., isolated places on the worksite), how it could occur (e.g., when working with customers or the public), the potential nature of the GBVH (verbal, physical, overt, subtle) and whose safety and health is likely to be affected (the target, coworkers).

2. Assess the risks for GBVH in the world of work and how to manage them

In deciding which measures should be taken to manage the health and safety risks that have been identified related to GBVH in the workplace, employers may take into account:

- The duration, frequency and severity of exposure to the workplace safety hazard (e.g., how often has a specific form of GBVH occurred where, and what specific risk has it led to?).
- Other psychosocial hazards that might increase the risk of harm, such as depression, anxiety or suicidality.
- Any information or support currently provided to workers. Conducting regular climate surveys, through which the employer collects information about the efficacy of interventions by asking if workers feel safer and making adjustments based on information gathered, is critical.

3. Control the risk by drafting a Workplace Health and Safety Plan to Prevent and Eliminate GBVH in the World of Work

Workplace health and safety plans contain the measures that an employer puts in place to address health and safety risks in the world of work. When implementing measures to control any risks of GBVH in the world of work, employers may consider:

- **Leadership and governance:** Leaders who show their commitment to tackling GBVH set the standard for what is acceptable in the workplace. Employers should consider providing ongoing training and support to leaders so that they are comfortable discussing GBVH and providing support to workers who may be experiencing it and others who are impacted.
- **Workplace culture:** A positive workplace culture helps establish what is considered acceptable behavior. Signs of a problematic culture include workers dismissing sexist jokes, ignoring harassment reports or tolerating inappropriate behavior. A diverse workforce and inclusive culture are key to preventing these harms.
- **Changing the design of tasks and systems:** It is important for employers to consider why a task is done a certain way and if it poses a risk of GBVH. If a risk is identified and assessed via the mapping exercise described above, employers can then look at ways to redesign the work to eliminate or minimize the risk as much as possible. For example, employers can reschedule tasks that require worker isolation to take place in the morning rather than at night or ensure that meetings with clients occur in public, accessible environments. Examples of shifting work structures to prevent GBVH by addressing a risk factor could include creating work teams with diverse representation based on age, race and/or gender-identity.
- **Physical environment, machinery and technology:** The design of the physical workplace environment, including the machinery and technology used, can increase the risk of GBVH. It can create conditions where harassment can occur more easily, be more severe or go largely unnoticed. Steps an employer can take in the physical environment of the worksite to address the risks for GBVH include:
 - Using clear or semi-opaque glass or screens to improve visibility in work areas
 - Restricting public access to areas where workers are alone or work at night
 - Ensuring worker facilities and amenities provide privacy and security, such as secure changing rooms
 - Designing the workplace to allow workers to move freely without physical contact.
 - Policies and processes: Written strategies, policies, processes, guidance and other organizational documents play an important role as a reference point to set expectations of organizational and personal behavior.

- **Reporting avenues and responses:** GBVH, including sexual harassment, is often underreported. It's important that clear, confidential and safe reporting pathways are available to workers, including alternative options for those who do not wish to report to their manager. Responses to GBVH should take a human-centered and trauma-informed approach, meaning the safety and preferences of the people impacted are considered. Responses to incidences of GBVH should always feed into the workplace safety and health risk management processes so the risk is better managed in the future.
- **Measurement and reporting:** To understand the risk of GBVH in a workplace and progress made to prevent it, employers should measure and report on their progress. Regular staff engagement and measurement against key performance indicators or targets can help monitor the risk of GBVH in your workplace and track improvement efforts over time.

All of these measures are adaptable, depending on the work setting. They require proactive identification and tailoring to ensure they meet the specific risks within a specific workplace.

Robin Runge is a senior consultant in the Women's Bureau.

Tags: Women's Bureau, gender-based violence, sexual harassment, harassment, discrimination

SHARE THIS:

Fresh starts for formerly incarcerated veterans

RELATED POSTS

MORE FROM AUTHOR



Employer strategies to end gender-based violence and harassment at work



6 actions for governments on gender-based violence and harassment at work

Submit Feedback



Collective Action to End Gender-Based Violence and Harassment



Keep Workers Safe from Gender-Based Violence and Harassment

[Scroll to top](#) ↑

Stay Connected! Sign up to receive Department of Labor updates.

Email Address

SUBSCRIBE

[Agencies](#)

[Forms](#)

[Guidance Search](#)

[FAQ](#)

[About DOL](#)

[News](#)

[Contact Us](#)

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

[White House](#)

[Benefits.gov](#)

[Coronavirus Resources](#)

[Disaster Recovery Assistance](#)

[DisasterAssistance.gov](#)

[USA.gov](#)

[Notification of EEO Violations](#)

[No Fear Act Data](#)

[U.S. Office of Special Counsel](#)

[Submit Feedback](#)

LABOR DEPARTMENT

[About DOL](#)

[Guidance Search](#)

[Español](#)

[Office of Inspector General](#)

[Subscribe to the DOL Newsletter](#)

[Read the DOL Newsletter](#)

[Emergency Accountability Status Link](#)

[A to Z Index](#)

ABOUT THE SITE

[Freedom of Information Act](#)

[Disclaimers](#)

[Plug-Ins Used on DOL.gov](#)

[Accessibility Statement](#)



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

200 Constitution Ave NW

Washington, DC 20210

1-866-4-USA-DOL

1-866-487-2365

www.dol.gov

Connect With DOL



[Site Map](#)

[Important Website Notices](#)

[Privacy & Security Statement](#)

[Submit Feedback](#)